

**OVERVIEW OF THE KIT**

# DECODING VISUAL MESSAGES

According to a 2001 National Science Foundation survey, the chief news source for a majority of Americans is television. Given the predominately visual nature of the contemporary news media, visual literacy plays a key role in global citizenship. In order for students to understand the constructed nature of the information they receive about the world, visual literacy instruction must be taught beyond the art classroom. The materials in this kit provide an opportunity to integrate visual literacy training into the study of American and global history. In addition, the process of collectively decoding the language of visual messages will provoke students to grapple with fundamental questions about truth, meaning making, and the origins of their beliefs, a struggle particularly well-suited to the developmental needs of adolescents.

This section of the teacher's guide is intended to give social studies and history teachers a brief introduction to the basics of visual analysis. It illustrates key concepts and vocabulary through examples from the accompanying *Newsweek* images from the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the War in Afghanistan. When doing visual analysis of the *Newsweek* images in class, students may need help from the teacher in applying these concepts and in using these vocabulary words. The questions in the slide scripts (such as "What messages about the war are communicated here?" and "What is your evidence?") are intended to elicit visual analysis. But if students fail to effectively decode the visual messages, the teacher should use

additional probe questions. Questions such as "How might the angle of this photo influence the message?" or "Do you see any symbolism in this photo?" will help train students to recognize and analyze visual messages. Teachers can use the suggestions below as well as the ANSWER and EVIDENCE entries in the slide scripts to help form probe questions.

Use the three pages of color *Newsweek* images when reading this section.

## LAYOUT AND DESIGN

Although photographers had a primary role in creating the images of war in this series, *Newsweek* editors, designers, and even marketers made key decisions about these visual constructions. In addition to selecting particular photos, the editors oversaw the layout and design of each page. This included making decisions about the size of each image and text, the relationship of images to text, and the use of design elements such as boxes, colored lines, and graphics. For example, slide #29 includes three photos of flags, kisses, and smiles greeting returning Gulf War soldiers. This montage of images gives a uniformly positive, happy, and patriotic impression about the end of the Gulf War.

## JUXTAPOSITION

In contrast to the uniformity of images in slide #29, slide #28 presents opposing messages about the war by juxtaposing (contrasting by placing next to each other) the

Kuwaiti celebrations on the left with the devastation of the Basra Road on the right. The warm, saturated colors of the Kuwaiti flags and faces contrast dramatically with the cool, muted colors on the right. The close-up and intimate perspective on the left is contrasted by the removed, aerial photo of the destroyed Iraqi vehicles. This visual contrast is reinforced by the text: “Triumph and Devastation.”

### SIZE

The size of a photo on the page often communicates its importance, particularly when it is contrasted with other photos or text. In slide #6 the anti-war movement seems to be equally weighted with the pro-war movement, while in slide #21 the photo of a lone anti-war protester is dwarfed by the photos of soldiers and tanks. In slide #18 *Newsweek* chose to make the photo of President George H.W. Bush relatively small and surrounded by black space to help emphasize his words: “This Will Not Be Another Vietnam.” In contrast, *Newsweek* chose to accentuate the size and strength of President George W. Bush (slide #41) in a post-9/11 cover. Also, the use of color in that image reinforces the patriotic leadership of the new president.

### COLOR

Color often adds meaning to an image. In slide #9, the red, bloody bandages in the lower right are mirrored by the red night flares in the upper left, reinforcing a sense of the danger and horror of the war. Compare the ghoulis, artificial green of Saddam Hussein's face in slide #19 with the ruddy complexion of General Norman Schwarzkopf's face in slide #27. During the Gulf War many *Newsweek* covers incorporated a mix

of red, white, and blue imagery that glorified U.S. military might (#22), weaponry (#24), and victory (#27). In slide #32 *Newsweek* used a photo of sailors in their dress whites to create a vibrant, dramatic, and patriotic (red, white, and blue) image to illustrate the beginning of the war in Afghanistan. Contrast this with the gritty dark browns and blacks in slide #43 that reinforce the message of the text – the Arab world is downtrodden and in need of saving.

### LIGHTING/TONE

Lighting can help give a hard or soft feel to a subject. Compare the soft, diffuse light on the face of the refugee child in slide #16 with the higher contrast and shadowed face of Lieutenant Calley in slide #15. The dark shadows and high contrast in slides #13, 19, and 33 add dramatic tension and harshness to those images. Photographic contrast and color have historically been adjusted in the darkroom, and now on the computer, even for news photos. In the case of covers, tones and colors may be even more dramatically manipulated (#13, 14, 19).

### SPACE

The use of space within the frame also has significance. The sky in slide #32 reinforces an open and majestic feeling while the dense jungle in slide #8 stresses chaos and conflict. The black space merging with Saddam Hussein's face in slide #19, together with the text, suggests a dark threat. The amount of space that a subject takes up within a frame may also suggest importance or power. The female soldier in slide #35 fills the frame and commands authority while the Arab man smoking a water pipe in slide #43 is

lower in the frame and surrounded by empty space.

### SETTING

The setting of a photograph often provides an important context for the image. The war room in slide #3, the jungle in slide #8, the desert in slide #21, the lawn in slide #41, and the café in slide #43 provide critical information to the viewer. If the setting for the cover photos of the U.S. bombers in slides #20 and 24 had been populated urban centers rather than desolate rural settings, the war might have seemed less removed and more destructive.

### LINES

Lines play an important part in the construction of any image. They lead our eyes to a particular subject or a particular conclusion. In slide #21 the converging lines created by the standing soldiers and the gun barrel lead the viewer's eye towards the tanks in the next image and, metaphorically, towards war. Similarly, the implied lines from the sailors and the flag in slide #32 lead the viewer's eye into the horizon (overseas). Both images were run in *Newsweek* just as the Gulf War (#21) and the War in Afghanistan (#32) were beginning. Lines can also have symbolic value such as in slide #28 where the many "V" shapes created by the fingers, arms, and flags imply victory (see also #24). The concentric circular lines added to the photo of Osama bin Laden in slide #39, especially when placed beside the words "hunt" and "zero in," imply that bin Laden is the target of the U.S. war.

### FRAMING

Lines can also frame a subject (#3, 4, 18, 22, 38). In a

similar way, textures, shapes, and colors can be used to frame and define a subject. In slide #11 the soldiers are framed by, and emerging from, smoke, suggesting the murkiness of the Vietnam War. The soldiers of "Nixon's secret army," in slide #14, are framed by darkness. The smiling girl in slide #40 is framed by the shapes of burka-clad women, suggesting that the war will liberate a generation of Afghan girls. The Northern Alliance soldiers in slide #38, who were allied with the United States against the Taliban, are framed by the red, white, and blue bus window.

### "DECISIVE MOMENT"

Still photographs are particularly well-suited for capturing and freezing action. Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson described the "decisive moment" as the instant when converging actions come to a climax in a photograph. Many of the cover images, including the famous photos in slides #13, 16, and 26, capture decisive moments.

### ANGLE

The angle at which a photographer takes the picture often affects meaning. A photo taken from below typically accentuates the subject's strength and authority (#5, 27, 35). A photo taken from above typically implies smallness or vulnerability (#10, 28, 37). Sometimes the angle of a photo will imply a perspective. For instance, slides #4 and 8 seem to be taken from the point of view of soldiers.

### BODY LANGUAGE

Reading the body language of the subject in a photo is often one of the most important factors in understanding

the central message of an image. In the Vietnam series, body language communicates a range of attitudes and emotions including authority (#3), defeat (#8), trauma (#13), and sadness (#16). Facial expressions can also communicate strong messages. Some of the faces in the Gulf War series illustrate pain (#23), anguish (#26), and joy (#27, 28, 29). When subjects' faces are obscured or their backs are to the camera their individuality is typically diminished and their image often becomes more symbolic than particular. The soldiers pictured in slide #21 are depicted as individuals with unique features and expressions, whereas the faceless soldiers in slide #32 are more likely to be seen as symbols for the U.S. military. When placed below an unfurling American flag and the text "We will not falter," the image communicates an unambiguous patriotic statement in support of the war.

## SYMBOLS

These slides also provide an opportunity to discuss visual symbols with your students. In the Vietnam series, *Newsweek* has included symbols for taxation (the tin cup in slide #7), the U.S. government (Uncle Sam in slide #12), secrecy (the negative photo in slide #14), and the media (film with sprocket holes in slide #16). Some of the images in the Afghan series reinforce new symbols such as the turban to represent Islamic fundamentalism (#33, 39, 42), and the burka to symbolize Islamic oppression of women (#40). During each of these wars the American flag was used to symbolize patriotic support (#6, 29, 32).

## TEXT

The role that text plays in these slides should not be underestimated. Words help bring meaning to the

images and tend to reinforce visual messages. In some cases the text provides the key meaning that the images help to illustrate (#14, 30, 41). The size, color, and font of text can also convey meaning. In slides #18 and 41 a particular font is used with quotation marks to emphasize speech. In slide #14 *Newsweek* chose a stencil-like font to illustrate government secrecy. In slide #33 the word "hate" appears in red and reinforces the anger and violence implied in the image. In three different Gulf War covers (#20, 22, 24) the word "war" appears in large block letters as if to emphasize its weight.

## RACE & GENDER ISSUES

The teacher may also want to use these slides to explore issues of race and gender. Students can analyze the nine depictions of women in these visual histories (#6, 9, 13, 28, 29, 35, 40, 41, 43) and discuss the patterns that emerge for women's roles (victim, protester, soldier, wife, etc). The teacher may ask if a different racial depiction would change the meaning of an image, such as substituting an African American woman for the white woman in slide #35 titled "Get Out of My Way." Would Jessica Lynch (slide #50, Bias in Coverage assessment) have been catapulted to celebrity status if she had been a Latino man? Slide #43 provides an opportunity to discuss stereotypical and even racist depictions of the Middle East. Why is *Newsweek* unlikely to have an article titled "How to Save the European World?"

For more information about visual literacy and the decoding of images, the Media Literacy Clearinghouse has links to many interesting articles and websites: <http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/vislit.htm>